ICONIC BRANDS

A Socio-Material Story

◆ OLGA KRAVETS AND ÖRSAN ÖRGE

Faculty of Business Administration, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract

This article takes the story of a monument to a Soviet brand of cheese as a starting point for discussing the socio-material practices that underlie the elevation of some brands to iconic status in the post-Soviet context. While the literature on iconic or 'symbolically dense' brands primarily focuses on shared meanings and ideas that iconic goods come to stand for, we argue that a material perspective provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of this consecration process. Accordingly, we consider the manifold material forms and practices through which the iconic status of some Soviet goods is constituted and identify (perceived) material constancy, monumentalization and legal codification as three main realms through which the transcendent socio-cultural values of these brands are contested and established. We take the story of a monument to a brand as a challenge to bringing the notion of materiality into a more explicit and dynamic relationship with signification, thus moving from the separation of the two notions. Such a move, we suggest, helps elaborate the role of iconic consumer goods in re-constructing social bonds, community identities and ideology.

Key Words ◆ iconic brands ◆ materiality ◆ monuments ◆ Soviet brands ◆ transvaluation

'A monument to the Soviet-era processed cheese *Druzhba* is unveiled in Moscow,' – thus read the Reuters news on 1 October 2005. Preceding the event, a year earlier, the cheese festival in Moscow's Hermitage public garden celebrated the 40th anniversary of the *Druzhba* (literally, Friendship) brand. A record 160 kg replica of the cheese chunk wrapped in foil

Journal of Material Culture http://mcu.sagepub.com
Copyright © The Author(s), 2010. Reprints and permissions:
http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journals/journalspermission.nav
Vol. 15(2): 205–232 [1359–1835 (201006) 10.1177/1359183510364076]

was created for the 'culinary joy' of the public. The media reviews competed for superlatives in describing 'the legendary brand', which was first produced in the mid-1960s, and remarkably has not changed since but become a symbol of sociality during the austere epoch of *zastoi* (stagnation). The reports claimed that the brand was recognized as a 'cultural heritage' and 'people's wealth' because, after all, it had been a creation of the Soviet people, it had withstood the times and was 'about people and their lives, loves and joys'. Carried along by the media hype, the idea of a monument to honour the brand emerged. Promoted by one manufacturer of the brand (the Karat company, Moscow), voting for the best 'people's design' was quickly underway and by October 2005 the 2.7m tall monument was erected. It featured a scene from a morality tale about a crow, a cheese and a fox except that, in contrast to the tale, in the sculpture the antagonists are locked in a friendly embrace sharing a pack of cheese. The allegorical undertones of the affair were hard to miss, given that in 2000 Karat succeeded in securing the exclusive right to the trademark from the Russian Patent Office (Rospatent), very much against the interests of (and thus angering) a dozen other manufacturers across the country who had been producing *Druzhba* since Soviet times.

While the media coverage of the event was positive, presenting the brand with a particular aura – a time capsule filled with the memories and heroics of the Soviet people, a consciousness of the constant and silent presence of *Druzhba* – there was a branded commodity and a commercial asset. This was evident in the sparse references to the ongoing court appeals by several manufacturers against Karat's claims to the trademark. There were also reports of marketplace skirmishes over the brand, such as trade inspectors seizing 'counterfeit' *Druzhba* or shopkeepers boycotting *Druzhba* not produced to a Soviet standard. Despite that, the reports emphasized, *Druzhba* consistently outperformed all foreign brands in its category with a market share of about 37 per cent and a brand awareness close to 70 per cent, both achieved without any advertising. Such a strong position in the market, one report explained, was because the label evoked personal and often passionate responses from individuals, which in turn was due to the product's longevity, ubiquity and affordability. Still, the unease over the commercial status of 'the cult brand' was particularly prominent in the squabble over the monument's location, which ended with the Moscow city authorities sanctioning the installation of the monument only on the manufacturer's premises rather than in a public space.[1]

This is a rough literal and metaphorical tale of the turbulent life of some Soviet brands in the post-Soviet period. The story illustrates an interesting case of a brand being elevated to the status of a cultural icon, which, according to *Business Week* (August 2004), is not an unusual phenomenon in contemporary culture. But this example is noteworthy because

it took place against the background of broad-scale destruction of Soviet-era monuments, memorials and symbols (see, for example, Forest and Johnson, 2002). What is interesting for us, however, is how the story highlights the importance of materiality in experiencing and making sense of brands (Miller, 2008). In this article, we use the story as a starting point from which to consider manifold material forms of representing ideas and social relations that are constitutive of a brand as a cultural icon.

Brands, their symbolic qualities and cultural power have recently attracted interdisciplinary scholarly interest (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Coombe, 1998; Foster, 2008; Klein, 2000; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007; Moore, 2003). But what is a brand? There are many definitions of brands because, as Moor (2007) suggests, a particular understanding emerges out of a specific context in which a brand is embedded. Drawing on the genealogy of a brand, however, it can basically be defined as a mode of connectivity between a producer and consumers (see also Drescher, 1992; Lury, 2004). Brands took on this role in the ancient empires and during the Industrial Revolution, when trade expansion and economies of scale demanded effective management of distance between producers and consumers (e.g. Rappaport, 2006; Wengrow, 2008; Wilk, 2006). In time, how this connectivity was performed and achieved has evolved with changes in technological as well as political–economic and socio-cultural conditions. As a result, new understandings of the concept of brand have emerged (see Aaker, 1991; De Chernatony and Riley, 1997; Holt, 2006; Kapferer, 1992; Levy, 1959). One such understanding is the notion of cultural brands, which scholars associate with conditions of late-industrial economy (Holt, 2004; also Baudrillard, 1998). Cultural brands do not simply or even necessarily identify a product or indicate a producer, rather they are symbolic forms that stand for dominant ideals, ideas and values in a given society (Holt, 2004).

Scholars have shown a particular interest in how brands acquire these higher cultural, moral and political values – a process that is often referred to as brand iconization (e.g. Coombe, 1998; Foster, 2008; Klein, 2000; Manning and Uplisashvili, 2007; Miller 1998a). It is argued that brands get transformed into repositories of cultural myths and ideals, historical events, achievements and aspirations, particularly when traditional cultural symbols become problematic. They come to represent cherished values and social relations in a community, thereby helping to sustain and reinforce a sense of belonging, unity and continuity. While most vividly observed in the context of a radically transforming society (as in our introductory story; see also Berdahl, 2001; Manning, 2009; Manning and Uplisashvili, 2007; Merkel, 2006), this phenomenon is not unique to that context. In societies where self and identity, including national or collective identity, are defined primarily in terms of consumption (Appadurai, 1986), commercial artifacts, such as brands, assume value

beyond their use or exchange value. Holt (2004) defines this as a 'cultural value' – imaginative resources that people use to build their identity.

In *How Brands Become Icons* (2004), Holt maps out the process of how brands accrue cultural value. He suggests brands perform myths that are attuned to society's desires and address society's cultural contradictions. These myths are created through a complex interaction among businesses, consumers, influential actors (e.g. connoisseurs) and popular culture (e.g. movies). In contrast to this societal-level vision of iconization, Miller (1998b: 12) details this process at a micro-level. He shows that common brands, such as Campbell's Soup, are mobilized to define and enact particular (desired or imagined) relationships within a family. As consumers make seemingly utilitarian choices, they imbue brands with affective values and ideals that transcend their use values. With time, these brands become entangled in these relationships to the point of being rendered essential and indispensable. They come to objectify particular familial values and relations, thus serving to create a family identity. As such, Miller (2001) argues, they acquire the spirit of inalienability (see Weiner, 1992).

Much of the literature on iconic brands has focused on the topic of their socio-cultural meaning with its inherent changes, which can be examined in relation to identity politics as these goods become involved in the ritual consolidation of socio-cultural systems. Therefore, the primary emphasis in the extant literature has been on the signs and meanings that these goods come to represent (Arvidsson, 2001; Berdahl, 2001; Holt, 2004; Merkel, 2006). In this article, we aim to complement this analytical angle with a focus on the manifest materiality of iconic brands, inspired by recent work on materiality (for example, Miller, 2005). In particular, this article draws on the idea that projects of immateriality (iconization, in our case) always involve a process of objectification (material per*form*ances) (see also Keane, 2003). Accordingly, in this article, we consider the history of some Soviet brands (*Sovetskie brendi*) and examine how since their emergence they have been implicated in the representation of different forms, ideas and social relations. In so doing, we show that materiality is not only an issue of material properties (such as product characteristics, labels, packaging, etc.), but of brands' presence, through which their 'symbolic density' can be secured or lost (Weiner, 1994: 394). We demonstrate that their presence is constituted and manifested in multifarious material realizations and is caught up and enacted in complex networks and institutions of collaboration and confrontation. Through our discussion of iconic Soviet brands, we suggest that a focus on materiality exposes otherwise elusive paradoxes and tensions that compose the iconic status of brands. In turn, this potentially enables a more nuanced understanding of their ideological role (Holt, 2004).

The descriptive and analytic account presented here is based on material collected in summer 2004 and winter 2005. In particular, we rely on documentary data consisting of media, market and government reports, legal documents and commentaries pertaining to Soviet/Russian brands, with publication dates ranging from 2000 to 2007 (the earliest and the latest amendment to the 1992 Trademark Law). These published sources are supplemented by interviews as we aim to provide some ethnographic insights to explore the materiality of iconic brands.

We begin our four-part story with a brief description of the origins and development of branded goods during the Soviet period. Next, we turn to the intermediate period after the Soviet collapse to reveal the importance of brands' material stability for their re-emergence as guarantors of quality and even 'symbols of the Soviet epoch'. Third, we consider in sequence the parallel processes of monumentalization of Soviet brands and their codification in the law. Our account of Soviet brands allows us to see the series of socio-material paradoxes and tensions that, we suggest, are the sustenance of brands' iconic status.

SOVIET BRANDS: OBJECTIFICATION OF SOVIET BUREAUCRACY AND PROMISES OF SOCIALISM

Soviet brands that are now referred to as 'symbols of the [Soviet] epoch' (*AiF*, October 2004) originated from two types of socialist products: staples and luxuries. Both emerged as part of the efforts of Stalin's government to define and construct a Soviet-style economy. But they have their roots in two distinct economic–political agendas: the first was geared towards establishing an effective market control mechanism, whereas the second reflected an explicitly ideological goal of creating goods that would materialize the promises of socialism for the people. We will briefly discuss each.

In the late 1920s, facing a consumption crisis resulting from a relentless drive towards industrialization, the Soviet government sought to assume control over the economy, which at that time was in a wretched state (Fitzpatrick, 1999). To this end, it initiated a series of measures and campaigns, including a highly publicized and strictly enforced 'battle for quality' (1928), which entailed a national standardization programme. The state expanded the system of state standards (*gosudarstvenniyi standart* – GOST), originally set up in 1925. Within a few years, the number of national standards grew exponentially, particularly in the consumer goods industry. As Dunn (2008) explained, GOSTs were a state means of streamlining and controlling Soviet production to achieve uniformity of produce, as well as of setting norms to assure product safety and quality for Soviet citizens (see also Sukhova, 2006). Notably, standards were conceived as forward-looking (*operezhayuschiyi*); as the one-time chairman

of the Standardization Committee, V.V. Kuibishev put it, 'standards were not just institutional norms but a means of improving and shaping the economy . . . goals to strive for.' Furthermore, underlying the development of quality standards was an understanding that socialist standards should be 'better' than the capitalist ones (see also *Rospatent*, n.d.).

Ideological motivations aside, the GOSTs were essential tools of production control. While number 5.1031–71 (GOST for *Druzhba* cheese) perhaps meant little, if anything, to consumers, it defined precisely every aspect of the product to assure the uniformity of *Druzhba* made in dozens of factories since the late 1960s (*Lenta.ru*, February 2007). Producers were to adhere strictly to a GOST and brand their goods accordingly. Labels were to include information about producers and their locations, making it possible to trace the source of defective products, so that responsibility could be attributed. In other words, branding was a policing practice; it aimed to enforce a quality standard and facilitated regulation of production and distribution of goods across the country (Dunn, 2008). In practice, as complete uniformity was hard to achieve, consumers used label information to distinguish between similar products, seeking out goods of a better quality[2] (Chernish, 2000). Thus, over time, at least some socialist control marks evolved into brands, in the conventional meaning of a unique identifier of a product source and a quality guarantee (Coombe, 1998).

As mentioned, there are also Soviet brands with a different genesis. They were born of a political campaign 'for prosperous life' (1932), which aimed to demonstrate in a *tangible* way that 'socialism means prosperity for all' (Fitzpatrick, 1999). In *Caviar with Champagne* (2003), Gronow provides a fascinating account of how Stalin's government undertook a concerted effort to mass produce what Gronow calls 'plebeian luxuries' – goods such as cognac, chocolate and perfume that were associated with aristocratic consumption in Russia and the West. While focusing on specific cases of product invention, such as *Sovetskoye Shampanskoye* (Soviet Champagne), Gronow (2003) stresses that 'the symbolic meaning of these goods and the message that they carried to the Soviet people were much more important than the actual products themselves' (p. 39) – in the Soviet Union, an ordinary worker could live 'like an aristocrat'. In other words, these goods were strategically conceived, produced and promoted as 'real' examples of socialist abundance and Soviet good life.

Given the propagandistic significance of these goods, an extensive infrastructure was mobilized in their production (Gronow, 2003): special R&D institutes and laboratories were established, scarce foreign currency funds spent and distinguished scientists enlisted. However, despite all the effort, Stalin's material tokens of the good life did not and could not become consumption staples of Soviet citizens for many reasons, including a lack of production capacity. Put differently, in that context, 'plebeian

luxuries' did not so much represent a prosperous life but merely a promise. As history showed, they *were* the prosperous life of a few.

Socialist luxuries thus came to incarnate the Soviet social hierarchy: the higher up one was on the social ladder, the more access one had to these items (Fehérváry, 2009; Osokina, 2001). Furthermore, these branded goods became implicated in producing a particular Soviet sociality. For, true to its promise of 'joyous life', the Soviet government made every effort to increase production and make these goods available to a wider consumer audience during holidays and political events, such as elections or party forums. Consequently, these goods became associated with celebrations, festivities and good times, although acquiring them still often meant spending hours in queues with an order number written on one's wrist. Also, to get these luxuries, ordinary people had to employ a wide range of ingenious strategies from *po znakomstvu* (through a contact), to *na chernom rynke* ('on the black market'), and to special shopping trips to wealthier, 'better-supplied' cities such as Moscow (Eaton, 2004). The story we heard from Nina (68 years) illustrates this point. We were discussing the Soviet brands that one can still find today, and she mentioned how seeing 'exactly that' (*tot samii*) tub of *Yantar* (a Soviet premium brand of cheese introduced in the 1960s) makes her smile:

> I was returning from a holiday in Sochi and in a train station store I found *Yantar*. I quickly emptied one of my bags (I threw some clothes away), collected all my money, handed them to a saleswoman and told her that 'I want as many tubs as my money will buy'; it came to 40 odd tubs in all. Only on the train, I realized that in the haste, I left no money for a seven-day train ride home. I ended up eating that cheese but did bring enough back to give as gifts to friends and acquaintances . . . Yes, in those days a tub of *Yantar* made a good gift. (Interview, August 2004)

Such and similar, often tragicomic, stories of procuring goods became a folklore of Soviet times. In this way, Soviet luxuries produced a distinctly Soviet way of social living, including May Day parades, waiting in a queue or procurement by *blat* (favours) (Ledeneva, 1998), while at the same time remaining *mythical*, in a sense that many people knew of them and sought them out, but only a few had seen and tried these products (Erofeev, 1999; cf. Holt 2004).

In addition to indexing Soviet sociality, Soviet goods came to stand as material evidence for the failures of the Soviet state and the ideological system overall. As Fehérváry (2009) suggested, the Soviet consumer culture project that aimed to intimately connect state and citizens through uniformly produced, marketed and distributed goods led to a perception of the state as an overarching external entity, in contrast to the official propaganda of the 'state as the people'. As such, the state was reified and objectified by the citizens as the ultimate source and provider of goods and services that 'dictated the qualities, aesthetics and prices of goods'

and, in fact, 'what counted as legitimate material necessity' (Fehérváry, 2009: 431; also Dunn, 2008; Manning and Uplisashvili, 2007). In the context of this reification, Soviet goods were imbued with complex political–ideological meanings and implicated in the construction of a particular political subjectivity.

THEY CHANGED BECAUSE THEY REMAINED THE SAME

The breakdown of the socialist economy in the early 1990s effectively resulted in the disappearance of the Soviet brands to the extent that the sets of relations that they were enacted through, and a part of, dissolved. Or rather, while many disappeared, some remained. Today, we witness the re-emergence of the Soviet brands as 'symbols of goodwill', identifiers of source and guarantors of quality (Coombe, 1998), and even as 'symbols of the [Soviet] epoch' (*AiF*, October 2004).

A number of researchers have argued that the continued presence and even re-enchantment of socialist consumer goods occurred through transvaluation, galvanized by the entwined socio-cultural and political crises of the time (Berdahl, 2001; Betts, 2000; Manning, 2009; Merkel, 2006; Van der Hoorn, 2003; Veenis, 1999). Briefly, it is suggested that the qualitative value change is in part a result of disenchantment with Western goods and Western ways more generally. Economic instability, particularly the 1998 devaluation of the rouble, meant that Western goods were out of reach for many, exposing as a fantasy the socialist ideal of material abundance and a comfortable life for all that had been projected onto the West (Betts, 2000). Furthermore, as Fehérváry (2009) argued, Soviet citizens' longing for Western goods primarily reflected the desire for a superior 'political–economic system that allows for creative productivity, social relationships, aesthetic pleasures, and expression without fear of state retribution' (p. 427).

Thus, Western goods were not only believed to be superior in every way – better quality, more technologically advanced, more aesthetically pleasing, healthier, and so on – but above all, they were perceived to have magical powers, capable of making a person happy. As a consequence, disillusionment was inevitable (Veenis, 1999). At the same time, the reclamation of a socialist past and the tokens thereof – Soviet brands – caught on, fired by the desire to secure a sense of stability, security and belonging amid large-scale and radical transformations and, critically, a dramatic disruption of everyday life (Betts, 2000; Van der Hoorn, 2003).

From a material perspective, we would like to add a simple, yet often overlooked, detail: we suggest that some Soviet brands continued in part because they remained on the shelves during the 1990s crises, whereas many foreign products disappeared or became too expensive due to currency devaluation. They remained because the existing factories

continued producing what they knew best in order to survive, or simply through inertia. Also, local entrepreneurs and foreign companies that acquired Soviet production facilities, unable or unwilling to invest in the unstable economy, often chose to continue with the existing know-how and products, a case in point being the cigarette brand *Prima* (British American Tobacco). Besides, many new firms and factories (with limited resources and/or a short-term focus on generating revenues quickly) either generically produced Soviet brands or 'imitated' Soviet and international brands.[3] Thus, the revival of some Soviet brands (either as identifiers of source or 'symbols') is not only a matter of the post-socialist consumer disenchantment/re-enchantment, but critically hinges upon the realities and conditions of the post-socialist production and market system.[4]

This considered, we would like to challenge the received notion that 'brands remain because they change' (e.g. Holt, 2004) and suggest that, in this case (of a radical disruption), Soviet brands changed because they remained the same. We find that the (perceived) physical unchangeability of brands or the sense of their uninterrupted presence were especially important in three areas where the transvaluation of brands transpired.

(1) Remembering to forget

Previous research has extensively discussed the central place of socialist goods in remembering and making sense of society and times past. It has been noted that objects became lasting, ceaseless reminders of events, experiences, people and places; as such, they assumed their role as sites of emotion and memory, connecting personal biographies to common history (Berdahl, 2001; Betts, 2000; Veenis, 1999). In our research, we see this in Nina's story (recounted earlier), where a possibly humiliating experience of provisioning in Soviet times is recalled as funny and even heroic; it speaks of sacrifices and projects a sense of accomplishment. In this way, as described by Miller (1998b), a certain self is created and reflected, where *Yantar* cheese as 'a thing for doing it with'. That is, the brand here mediates and helps to construct an experiential relation between past and present self.

For our purposes, the significant factor is that the brand presence provokes an acute sense of direct contact and immediacy of a historical experience, regardless of how far removed it is from the way we are today. In a brand's aesthetic faithfulness, there is an essence of authenticity as if the past itself has been preserved in it. As Nina noted, with its familiar look, *Yantar* evokes emotions and particular memories. Although the story is clearly a rendition of the past events, for us as listeners, a brand authenticates the story; it serves as tangible evidence of Nina's past. *Yantar* makes her memories more real, vivid and concrete for us, and gives the past shape and form – indeed, one can almost taste the past!

'Taste' was a word we often heard when people explained their preferences for Soviet brands. Sutton (2001), through his fine account of food in a Greek island, exposes the connection between food, its tastes and smells, and remembering/forgetting. In our conversations, people were hesitant to entertain this link, insisting that their taste evaluation is 'objective' (a point we will return to later). Such hesitance reflects awareness of nationalist associations of local foods, as Caldwell (2002) discussed, and at the same time it appears to be an attempt to distance oneself from socio-politically motivated choices for local foods. Notwithstanding their personal reasonings, many informants expressed their unease that manufacturers played on 'childhood tastes' and feelings of nostalgia. In this regard, some informants found changes in product recipes and product extensions particularly exploitative.

More generally, it becomes obvious from media reports that the aesthetic constancy of a Soviet brand serves as a memory touchstone; it connects people and conveys certain sensibilities of the past. For example, discussing the merits of *Druzhba*'s symbolic status, a newspaper proudly writes that it tastes and looks exactly the same as nearly half a century ago – foil-wrapped with an elongated letter D hugging a blue globe against a yellow background – and concludes that the imagery is so familiar to all generations of Soviet people that *Druzhba* cannot fail to be a symbol of the times (*Utro*, April 2004). This and similar statements seem to ignore the fact that during the Soviet era precisely such uniformity of Soviet goods and their unchangeability across space and time used to be seen as damning, tangible evidence of socialist economic inefficiency and lack of choice (Berdahl, 2001; Fehérváry, 2002, 2009). Today, we suggest, the focus on form – aesthetic constancy – eclipses such past experiences and understandings and, in this way, affords ample space for an experiential remembering while forgetting.

(II) Holding it together

Enduring, ubiquitous and without alternatives as they were, some Soviet brands also came to serve to 'bind human actors and participate in developing specific forms of social order because they allow for common practices to develop' (Preda, 1999: 355). Along these lines, then, we observe that the unchangeability of the Soviet labels not only makes them stable and common reference points for the Soviet epoch, but also turns them into fixtures that encapsulate social knowledge and hold collective practices together.

On a micro-level, similar to Miller (1998b), we see this most widely in the practice of 'handing down' the generations a favourite family recipe, in which a branded Soviet product is an important ingredient. For example, one informant told us that she occasionally buys *Yantar* because

her mother's specialty *shchi* (cabbage or sauerkraut-based soup) calls for two spoonfuls of it.

On a macro-level, however, the case of *Sovetskoye Shampanskoye* (Soviet Champagne, hereafter *Sovetskoye*) is remarkable. Despite falling short of its original promise – abundance for all (Gronow, 2003) – it became an integral, almost sacrosanct part of any celebration in Russia, particularly at New Year. During the holiday season, the media routinely run stories on where to get the best price and quality *Sovetskoye*. We came across an article in *Woman.ru* magazine (December 2004) that teaches a young generation of women how to create a New Year table setting and it says '*Sovetskoye* has to be cracked at midnight with Kuranti' (the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower clock). This is echoed in the stories of our informants. Marina (40 years) told us that she got a bottle of *Sovetskoye* as a New Year present from her company. When asked to comment on the gift, she said that *Sovetskoye* is 'the New Year thing. Millions raise their glasses with exactly the same thing. That is how it has always been.' In response to 'what has changed', she observed that 'in Soviet times, you had to get it (*dostat'*) – fight in a queue or beg (*klyanchit'*) your acquaintances to get one for you, whereas now they just give it to you.' This remark simultaneously implies the sense of continuity and progress, the achievements of the current times – once an endeavour, an accomplishment, a sacrifice (recall Nina's story!), it is now a token of goodwill from your bosses. That is, the ethos of the brand (its association with celebration, togetherness and sharing) is carried on, albeit the social relations that hold it together have now changed.

Certainly, the transition from socialism to a 'market democracy' was not smooth for *Sovetskoye*; product counterfeiting was rampant in the 1990s, with an army of fly-by-night producers mixing it in their kitchens.[5] A typical consumer response to the situation was: 'I heard people got poisoned, so I said 'no more' (Nina). Yet, today, *Sovetskoye* is still 'the New Year thing'. One informant explained: 'it was and remains the cheapest sparkling wine and its contents are reliably drinkable (*pit' mozhno*)'; whereas another informant, a self-proclaimed 'alcohol expert', said that '*Sovetskoye* is unique in its sweetness, and as such it is markedly different from its imported counterparts. Since for years it was the only one available, *this is* the Champagne taste people developed and now they choose the taste they are accustomed to' (Vadim, 40 years). Thus, by virtue of its omnipresence and cultural embeddedness, the brand acquired the kind of affective capacity that Marina mentioned: an ability to provoke a sense of cultural belonging and a bond of sameness. This affective capacity supports *and* is close to 85 million bottles of *Sovetskoye* produced annually by nearly 30 manufacturers across the country (*Kommersant*, 2004).

(iii) The ghost of GOSTs

In conversations, people wrestled with the question of 'what is the actual value?' of Soviet brands, often emphasizing that while they understood how *others* would buy these brands for political and/or cultural resonance, their preferences were based on quality, price and availability. Such pragmatic considerations are substantiated by the often-cited data that every fourth product in the food industry is a Soviet brand and these goods are cheaper on average than their new or foreign competitors (e.g. *Ogonek*, January 2005). This is because many Soviet brands are generic: they are produced in identical ways by several manufacturers.

However, there is much to be said about *quality* (a 'better taste' that our informants 'objectively' cited), which is mainly defined with reference to GOSTs: 'because they are made according to GOSTs'. The question of how Soviet GOSTs became a 'golden standard of quality' deserves a detailed investigation. We can suggest that what underlies the transformation of GOSTs into a critical selling point in its own right – a quality guarantee – is the assumption that things have not changed. The GOST number on the package stands for continuation of past production practices, while the latter are viewed through the affective and effective lens of consumers' current concerns with quality, arising from their perceptions of the present production system.

To explain this point, our interactions revealed that people saw a GOST number as embodying a defining feature of the Soviet economy – its product orientation in a non-competitive and non-consumer-driven market. Accordingly, this incorporated certain perceptions and judgements about Soviet production, which could, however, vary greatly. On the one hand, we heard that Soviet technology was rudimentary, hence 'natural'; 'they had no clue about all the Es, stabilizers, flavour enhancers, etc. so it was all natural' (Lena, 36 years).[6] On the other hand, we were told time and again about 'scientific standards' and that 'there were whole technological institutes developing recipes and working out standards for sausages, chocolate and butter' (Volodya, 59 years).[7] One informant observed that the very existence of GOSTs on goods, including those produced in foreign-owned factories, and advertisements of various products as '*GOSTovski*' (by GOST) are 'a testament' to Soviet technology. The media echoes and upholds such beliefs, as demonstrated by a series entitled 'Our Brand' in *Ogonek* throughout 2004. For example, one article describes how cheese such as *Druzhba* is still produced to an old GOST:

> . . . all natural ingredients – they take quality cheeses, crumble them, and add butter, natural cream, dry milk and spices . . . But, most importantly, – no preservatives, artificial colours or flavours. Cheese with mushrooms means real mushrooms, chopped and added in. By contrast, overseas, processed cheese is produced with artificial ingredients because it is more profitable.

> Such is the paradox of progress: recently, in a trade fair in Germany, there was a long queue to taste our 'product, untouched by civilization'. (*Ogonek*, May 2004a)

Following Veenis (1999), we propose that underlying such judgements of quality is a disillusionment with Western goods (the 'Western way' generally) and a parallel re-enchantment with the Soviet past – the vision of a simpler time and place ('natural') as well as more promising ('scientific') (also Klumbyte, 2007), with a GOST number supporting these complex and contradictory sentiments.

More than this, however, GOST is also an efficacious seal of quality. As our informants pointed out, at the very least it means 'reliably good' (*pit' mozhno* and *est' mozhno* – 'reliably drinkable' and 'edible'). It is arguably a minimal but important assurance, considering people's experiences of the 1990s 'wild market' with its rise of falsified and sub-standard produce, which in some cases led to health epidemics (see Dunn, 2008, for a detailed discussion). This, among other things, led to a profound distrust in the 'invisible hand of the market' (in the sense that it is ultimately in the interest of businesses to offer quality goods to consumers). Conversely, there is a lingering trust in the visible hand of the state (in the form of GOSTs), even if the state is no longer there, at least in its former capacity. A Soviet GOST, we speculate, is seen as external to the interests of a company, and is thus an objective guarantor of quality. Two points should clarify this. First, a GOST is no longer mandatory. In the 1990s, the GOST system of production control was dismantled; its parts were transformed into a certification body akin to UKAS.[8] Product certification is compulsory, but is defined by producers' 'technical conditions' (*technicheskiye usloviya*) and relative to some basic safety requirements (see Dunn, 2008: 252). Second, GOSTs are often believed to be superior to such certifications because historically they were developed and set by the state as ideal types. In short, as the earlier quote from *Ogonek* implies, they were 'not for profit'.

Thus, 5.1031–71 turned into an embodiment of product quality and distinction based on claimed familiarity of consumers with the Soviet economic system and its rules, inherent in its production technologies (which could be judged good or bad), along with and against their experiences of the post-socialist market and Western goods. In this way, GOST actually embodies people's individual and collective memories concerning the past and the absence of the Soviet economy. Stripped of its original function (standardization and policing of production), GOST is still constitutive of a Soviet brand, as it now objectifies differences and affinities between Soviet brands and post-Soviet/foreign branded goods, command economy and market economy, scientific and natural, 'before and now'.

MONUMENTALIZING SOVIET BRANDS

While, to our knowledge, thus far only one brand (*Druzhba*) has been materialized in bronze, the stories we collected suggest that this is just a peculiar material realization of a general tendency to monumentalize Soviet brands. Like monuments, they are constructed as entities incarnating stories of ennobling events and achievements, of people's triumphs and struggles in Soviet times. In this way, Soviet brands are enlisted to reproduce the desired identities and the ideal past (Rowlands and Tilley, 2006). Yet, Soviet brands differ from 'traditional' monuments; perhaps we can refer to them as *everyday* monuments. Brands mostly reference people's lived experiences; as such, they appear to keep memory more vivid and more specified (again, consider Nina's story). Where monuments generally stand apart from everyday life, brands do not. Accordingly, they seem more closely tied to people. They are not bound to a specific place but circulate widely, while still keeping their (recognizable) material form. Furthermore, monuments are usually purpose-built to mark and commemorate historical–cultural moments retrospectively, whereas brands have been implicated in these moments as they occurred. As 'the stuff of daily provisioning' (Miller, 1998b), Soviet brands were a constitutive part of experiences, events and imaginations. Significantly, they indexed Soviet citizens' relations to the state and helped to perform a particular form of political subjectivity (Fehérváry, 2009), referencing certain socio-cultural and political ideas. The nature of signification, however, shifted during the 1990s political–economic transition and the 'crisis of values' it brought about. Specifically, some Soviet brands that once signified Soviet sociality came to stand for the entire Soviet past and value-system (Manning, 2009). In this regard, then, Soviet brands became more like traditional monuments.

Thus, brands' circulation *and* endurance, uniformity and stability across time and space made them into common touchstones that intimately connect people and index the Soviet epoch as a whole (*Utro*, April 2004; also Manning 2009). However, it is clear that brands also denote different (often contradictory) values and ideas for different people. That is, a 'common' brand is capable of accommodating competing identifications. The following reminiscences of *Druzhba* will illustrate this.

The celebratory media coverage of the *Druzhba* anniversary from our opening story suggests that Soviet brands are conducive to collective remembering. Being the cheapest everyday food product and available everywhere, *Druzhba* is 'a symbol of collective daily living' (*bytovanie*) in Soviet times. One report explained:

> In the USSR, there were not that many things that really, truly united people. *Druzhba* was indeed, without a lie, a universal product for ANY category of people. Available and cheap. Homemakers chopped it into their husbands' salads and soups, unmarried men clumsily crafted cheese sandwiches, students

> and intelligentsia washed it down with *portwine* (a cheap Soviet version). (*Ogonek*, May 2004a; capitals in the original)

This vision of Druzhba as a democratic food (*demokraticheskaya zakuska*) consumed by all in a 'society of privileges' dominated the memories reported in the media. Such vision has a distinct bitter–sweet flavour, best expressed by the writer Viktor Shenderovich, who said on that occasion: 'In the most difficult times, [*Druzhba*] was hard to live without.' The subtext here is that *Druzhba* (as a product, literally meaning *friendship*) was an inalienable part of Soviet *obshchenie*, or companionship in conversation (Yurchak, 2006), the realm where people took refuge from the overbearing system and fostered resistance sensibilities, as the poet Igor Ignatiev put it (see Figure 1):

FIGURE 1 This poem by Igor Ignatiev was first broadcast in the inaugural *Plavlenniyi Sirokí'* radio programme on 14 November 2003.
Print-outs are available at www.echo.msk.ru/programs/plsyrok

Российский плавленый сырок
В года суровых испытаний
Во дни сомнений и метаний
Был над тобой не властен рок.
Ветрами грозными продут,
Ты воплощал народный гений,
И был для многих поколений
Скорее символ, чем продукт.
В эпоху непроглядной тьмы
Кремлевским в пику истуканам,
Разливши водку по стаканам,
Тобой закусывали мы.
Хотя и меньше, чем едой,
Но ты был больше, чем закуской.
Ты был идеей нашей русской
И путеводною звездой…

Russian processed cheese. In days of doubt and quest, fate was powerless over you. Blasted by formidable winds, you embodied people's spirit (imagination). And for many generations, you have been more of a symbol than a product.
During the epoch of bleak darkness, in spite of Kremlin dummies, we poured vodka into glasses and chased it down with you. Although less than a meal, you were certainly more than a snack. You were our Russian (national) idea. And a guiding star …

Though poetically grotesque, these verses neatly illustrate how *Druzhba*, *the* brand of *plavlenniyi sirok* (processed cheese), is immortalized in biographical stories of the dissident and alternative life-style groups of the 1960s, which are generously cited in brand presentations today (*Izvestia*, April 2004a; *Utro*, April 2004). Moreover, the same sentiments lay at the heart of the satirical (i.e. critical of state, politics and power) TV and radio programmes, *Besplatniyi Sir* (free cheese) and *Plavlenniyi*

Sirok (processed cheese), where cheese is surely 'more a symbol than a product'. One creator explained that *sirok* reifies the idea of 'a bare democratic minimum' (*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, May 2004). More broadly, one can argue that its imagery (*friendship* and the letter D 'hugging' the globe), historical use and the texture of the product encapsulate the attitudes of the 1960s generation: it is possible to make a difference by 'holding hands together' and through intellectual (soft) engagement with power, as a journalist described it (*Ogonek*, January 2005).

However, the experience of the 1970s (the time of *zastoi*, stagnation) is somewhat different and certainly less romantic. It is that of 'the legendary *Druzhba* diet', when many Soviet people, at the end of the month, before pay day, had to make do with old and dry *Druzhba*, the only left-over in the fridge or food item affordable. There was *Druzhba* (friendship, solidarity) in scarcity of products, money and often hope. Therefore, the key association is some yellow 'stony substance' (*takoe . . . okameneloe*) in the words of one journalist (*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, May 2004). In our data, there are references to *Druzhba* as 'Soviet fast-food' which underscore the product's ubiquity and affordability, but also reflect self-irony and deep cynicism of 'the last Soviet generation' (Yurchak, 2006). This attitude is epitomized by *Mit'ki*, the 1980s *vnje* (profound disengagement) life-style group that, not surprisingly, defines its archetypal character through *plavlenniyi sirok*.

> [Mityok] is unpretentious: for example, he can sustain himself for months on cheap processed soft cheese [*plavliniyi sirok*], considering this product tasty, good and economical, to say nothing of the fact that its consumption does not require spending time on cooking. (Shinkarev, 1990: 18, cited in Yurchak, 2006: 239)

In sum, there is certainly a predominant version of what the brand denotes. But then, as only 'a mere mundane object' (Engelke, 2005) can, a brand acts to reflect, reverberate with and refract complex sensibilities and experiences of living in a specific time within an epoch. Relating to a brand, social groups tell their own stories, inscribing their cherished qualities, virtues and values. In this way, we can say, a brand enacts people's understanding of their relationships with their peers, society and state; it becomes a locus of objectification of desired (historical) identities. Furthermore, woven immanently into daily living, brand becomes saturated with sensibilities of a particular time to the point of embodying them. That is, brand is not simply a vehicle for shared meanings, but it can portray and stand for a generation, endowed with an anthropomorphic power of agency, as the verses we quoted earlier indicate. As such, we see that a brand is able to reproduce and proliferate its presence (here, for example, in the form of TV/radio programmes). Broadly, we suggest that the Soviet brand is a protean embodiment, both in terms of

its forms and its capacity to represent multiple, often contradictory, (Soviet) values and ideas, and with them people's biographies.

The media, however, present Soviet brands as symbols of unity and a shared heritage of all Soviet people, and thus gloss over that proteanness. Media stories are replete with phrases such as 'symbol of [Soviet] epoch', 'our cultural heritage', 'Soviet heritage', 'cult Soviet product', and so on. Beyond mere epithets, these stories built up Soviet brands as heroic creations, with an almost saintly legacy, expurgated of any social, generational and political differences these brands might once have marked. These stories are reminiscent of folktales: set in a far-off time and place, featuring a mythic object and told to amuse and amaze. Based on several brand reports[9] and as a tribute to Propp (1968[1928]), we can reconstruct a composite form as follows.

First, a brand's origins are mythical but often grounded in a common-good aspiration, however outlandish it may sound. Examples include beating a Western product (*Yantar*), beating the fascists (*Stolichnaya*), or beating Americans in the race to Mars (*Druzhba*) and 'nobility for all!' (*Sovetskoye Shampanskoye*). It is typically emphasized that a brand was loved by all 'regardless of social status', whether it was created for army generals (*Stolichnaya*) or comrades 'who suffered in the civil war and from the tsarist despotism' (*Doktorskaya*, a bologna-type sausage). Second, there is a social life of a branded commodity alongside people when they queued for hours or boarded 'sausage trains' (*kolbasniye poezda*), celebrated Victory Day with *Sovetskoye* or succumbed to melancholy with *Stolichnaya* and *Druzhba*, and measured salaries in kilos of *Doktorskaya* and paid in bottles of *Stolichnaya*. Third, there are times of trial and 'identity crises' caused mostly by external forces, as expressed in an *Itartass* article:

> *Doktorskaya*'s reputation suffered greatly, first, during 'developed socialism', when an innovative idea to feed fish to pigs meant a fishy smell for *Doktorskaya*, and then, during 'early capitalism', when frozen imported beef was introduced into the recipe. (*Itartass*, December 2006)

Fourth, there is a final triumph – a brand emerges that is modern but true to its origins; 'amidst today's market variety, *Doktorskaya* is a preferred choice, when made to a Soviet GOST albeit different from its 1936 original'. Also, the brand is recognized and appreciated by the world; recall here the success of Druzhba at a German trade fair (*Ogonek*, May 2004a).

At the end, a humble cheese emerges as a cultural artifact, transformed into a fictionalized figure, which is greater than its praised GOST and its nutritious value. Just like a folktale, the plot is important; here it indexes 'our' epic lineage – contradictory, incomplete, ambiguous and heterogeneous ('what we went through'), and 'our' cultural values. The

life of a Soviet brand mimics that of the people, while perfecting it. Also, the life story of a brand incorporates indigenous knowledge and memories. Thus, people's relationships to a brand are presented as special, no one 'from outside' can partake in them. Then, a brand, the life of which is retold in such a way that it engenders and typifies virtues highly valued in the society (e.g. solidarity and perseverance, equality and resilience), is placed upon a pedestal in the cultural pantheon.

Notably, this *cult*-ivation continues in the news accounts of the 'plight' of Soviet brands in a post-socialist market. The media often report on marketplace and legal rows around Soviet brands, and lament their inevitable loss at the hands of profit-hungry corporations that use brands as pawns in business matters and/or abuse their reputations for profit, for example, by compromising ('cheapening') the original recipes. This is unacceptable, some authors reckon, because Soviet brands are distinctly different from Western brands: they not only encapsulate unique Soviet experiences but are people's creations. Such media framing echoes the ideological postulates about socialist property that had been cultivated by the state for decades, rather than the more commonly felt and enacted paternalistic model of the relationships between people, state and production, where the state is viewed as a representative of the people that manages and operates means of production on their behalf (Dunn, 2008; Fehérváry, 2009; Manning and Uplisashvili, 2007). Specifically, media evoke the idea that in the Soviet country, the 'people as state' owned the means of production, operated industries through employment and produced for the common good as opposed to profit.[10] Thus, Soviet brands that were created and manufactured in Soviet times are the people's wealth (*narodnoye dostoyenie*).[11]

That phrase – 'people's wealth' – underscores the cumulative effect of media stories, which is a reification of Soviet brands as a quasi-sacred monumental object – beyond price, belonging to all and no one in particular (Humphrey, 1995: 59). Through purification, simplification and glamorization of historical 'facts,' a brand points to the Soviet-era in a generalized and encompassing way. As conveyed in the folktale, in its monumental form, a brand does not engage specified memories and identifications; rather it expresses national spirit and common Soviet history. In addition, references to and narrations of Soviet brands as 'national wealth' and 'Soviet heritage' cast them as objects of cultural and historical value, passed down from earlier (Soviet) generations (e.g. Taratuta, 2004). Thus, such rhetoric combined with the content of the news stories (with headlines such as 'Brands that we are losing', 'Life after the death of confectionery brands', 'Conflicts around old Soviet trademarks', and so on) fuel public concern and lay the foundation for reclassifying Soviet brands judicially as a kind of property, subject to state protection.

SOVIET BRANDS AS PROPERTY: ALIVE IN WAR, DEAD IN PEACETIME?

In the mid-1990s, businesses realized that many Soviet trademarks represented a significant economic capital due to their 'recognition value', arising from their longevity, omnipresence and the history they share with people – such was the explanation offered in the media chronicles of 'the trademark wars' (e.g. *Kompania*, August 2000). 'Wars' over Soviet brands were the fallout of an introduction of a new property regime through the privatization process, where property was often understood as *things*, rather than a nexus of social relations and values, rights and obligations (see Verdery, 2003). One consequence was that 'soft' assets such as technologies and trademarks were generally not viewed as assets in their own right; most often they were seen as 'something that comes with a factory' (Alexander, 2004). Specifically, the hastily drawn Trademark Act of 1992 laid the ground for these wars because it organized trademark registration in a way that effectively sanctioned appropriation of Soviet marks on a first-come-first-served basis (*AiF*, October 2004).

While there were hostile takeovers (*Kompania*, August 2000), the 'trademark wars' were mostly carried out through the medium of written documents. Based on legal records,[12] a trademark war would run schematically as follows: upon receiving the certificate of a trademark registration, a rights-holder (*pravoobladatel'*) would send cease-and-desist letters to other producers and issue press releases about a million-dollar investment in a trademark's development and promotion, demand royalties, file complaints and publicize these activities. In response and in an attempt to prove that a 'trademark is not just a label' (*etiketka*), defendants (*otvetchik*) would file appeals, present archives of letters, orders and instructions from a Soviet ministry, GOST certificates, records of production figures for the past 40 years, passages from Soviet textbooks detailing the product's technological processes, labelling and packaging requirements, and then publicize all these activities. This is, of course, only a *visible* paper trail of the 'trademark wars'.

While this account is simplified, it still shows how a flurry of papers crafted a brand into a particular material form (a *thing* of property); just like *papier-maché*, every piece of paper was adding, articulating and reinforcing a specific dimension of that form. What is also evident is that this emergent material form is constituted by and, in turn, makes visible, the shifting understandings and confrontational relations between 'before and now', between the Soviet economic system and 'the market' (Western, neo-liberal) and of course, between different regimes of values.

In broad terms, making them 'both discursively and materially present', to cite Blomley (1998: 572), the 'trademark wars', through the medium of paper and other channels, were keeping Soviet brands in circulation and, importantly, constructing them as *property*, an economic

and legal entity (Coombe, 1998). However, given the publicized sentiments around these marks (as discussed earlier), the 'wars' were seen as destructive. Indeed, 'imminent death' was an often-predicted outcome of the 'wars' for Soviet brands. Thus, in December 2002, the government 'intervened to protect Soviet trademarks', to bring peace and order into the market by way of amending the Trademark Act of 1992 (*Prime-Tass*, June 2006). A regulatory framework was set up to resolve the disputes, according to which Soviet trademarks were recognized as unique entities and specific provisions were made to regulate their use.

The 'protective strategies' that were introduced were meant to reassert various degrees of governmental control and consequently to legitimate the regulation of some industries and substantially consolidate others (as indicated earlier, Soviet brands had sizeable market shares, e.g. *Sovetskoye* [68%] and *Druzhba* [53%]). While some commentators referred to the legislative move and the activities that followed as a *nationalization* of Soviet trademarks (e.g. Marjin, 2002), it was generally supported on two grounds. First, it was seen as a step towards a 'civilized market' – a necessary measure to protect the public from sub-standard products and unscrupulous producers. Second, 'to return to the people what [brands] rightfully belong to them', for 'if Soviet brands were created by people, why should now only a few reap the benefits?' (Taratuta, 2004; *Vedomosti*, August 2000).

Specifically, the amendment made provision for two strategies to address contentious issues of Soviet trademarks. The first involved creating a *product style* (*vidovoe ponyatie*) concept, whereby a trademark for a product made in several factories before 1992 would lose its proprietary status. As such, the strategy mainly regulated trademarks for staple products, whereas producers of Soviet luxury brands (typically produced exclusively) maintained their proprietary rights. An example is the Soviet beer *Zhigulevskoe* that was designated as a *product style*. As such, it could now be freely produced by any manufacturer as long as a basic standard was followed. Consequently, the rights-holder of this brand of beer since 1992 lost the exclusive rights. Today, once 'a famous Soviet symbol', *Zhigulevskoe* has a 21 per cent market share (as of 2007) by consumer preference, down from 46 per cent in 2000 (ROMIR, n.d.).

The second strategy (by a historical analogy, *collectivization*) involved the construct of a *collective trademark*, an idea initiated in 1999 by the tobacco industry. Twenty-one tobacco producers formed the *Rostabakprom* association and registered the *Prima* trademark (a Soviet brand of cheap cigarettes) under its name. The members paid a hefty use fee and collectively contributed to its promotion. Other industries (e.g. dairy and confectionery) followed suit, setting up associations or holdings. Some trademarks became collective, while others were divided among members based on internal agreements. Notwithstanding the explicit monopolistic

tendencies of such arrangements, the government did not contest the concept (as long as it could also be a part of such associations) and it was made official through legal amendments (*AiF*, October 2004; Rosenberg, 2000; *Russki Fokus*, September 2001).

With the legal framework in place, the government put it to work by setting up *Soyuzplodoimport*, a federal enterprise charged initially with the repossession and management of Soviet vodka brands, followed later by other products.[13] It was reported that the creation of such a centralized body resulted in a redistribution of property rights, and hence of power within the industry (*RBCDaily*, August 2004). As noted earlier, some analysts read the situation as nationalization, while others suggested that the change in trademark ownership served to strengthen the government economically and politically, given the socio-cultural significance of Soviet brands (e.g. Marjin, 2002; Taratuta, 2004). For Soviet brands, the outcome was, and still is, ambiguous. A couple of years ago, *Kommersant* (July 2008) reported that the government was considering alternative strategies for working with Soviet brands since it transpired that financial indexes fell after *Soyuzplodoimport* obtained the rights to these brands.

Broadly speaking, then, what is the outcome of the legal codification of Soviet brands? Couched in terms of 'cultural heritage' protection and concerns over product quality, the government's legislative activities in 2002 and more recently in 2007 (aimed at reinstating the Russian Federation as the rights-holder of all Soviet trademarks, *Prime-Tass*, June 2006), ratified the state regulation of Soviet trademarks. Consequently, the new politico–legal framing of Soviet brands recast them as instruments of governance. On the one hand, praised as 'fruits of common intellectual labour' (*vsem mirom*) and 'Soviet heritage' (Taratuta, 2004), these brands help to secure popular support and legitimate political 'attention' paid to the market. Also, by raising ideas for discussion and providing arguments and justification, Soviet brands authorize and open up a discursive field for revisioning the Soviet past without addressing questions of injustices and accountability. On the other hand, since they are involved with business and property, Soviet brands structure particular forms of market intervention (e.g. by amending the law, creating new legal constructs, the setting up of federal agencies and so on), while at the same time serving as an alibi for such interventionism, since, in the post-socialist landscape, all activities carried out in the name of 'the market' are deemed beyond scrutiny.

CONCLUSION

On 30 January 2008, the news agencies reported 'an act of vandalism': the central part of the monument to the Soviet brand *Druzhba* – a bronze pack of cheese weighing nearly 196 kgs – was stolen. A reward of 100,000

roubles (about US$4,000) was offered for the return of the piece (Karat, n.d.). A week later, a *Vesti-Moscow* news bulletin (7 February 2008) informed its viewers that the stolen pack of cheese had been recovered; apparently too heavy for the vandals to carry, it was hidden in a large snowdrift near the statue.

This seems to be a rather fitting conclusion to our story of the Soviet brands. For, in our view, the finale metaphorically illuminates one point – iconic brands are elusive properties (Coombe, 1998). Even cast in bronze, they can still be lost or 'stolen'. Indeed, the sponsor of the monument, the Karat company, had lost its court battle for the proprietary rights for *Druzhba* in 2007, when the government took control of the trademark. Attractive in terms of its (social, political, 'street', etc.) value, a brand might just prove too heavy and perhaps too slippery to carry even for a government. As we noted, the recent indicators on the performance of government-owned Soviet brands suggest as much. However, elusive as they are, iconic brands can serve as effective and insidious instruments of power and governance. But then, their solidification either in the form of a monument or a letter of the law threatens to vaporize their symbolic density.

At the same time, this seemed like only one part of the story. For, when reading the *Druzhba* media coverage, the sense that the whole thing was a farce and that a brand had become a stage prop was inescapable and nagging, even though the identities of the actors, the audience and the *deux ex machina* were not quite clear. However, as we read more of the Soviet brand stories, we realized that this sense ensued from the tension created by the juxtaposition of the humble, even lowly, cheese and the 'monument to the Soviet epoch' – a monumental cheese! What could be more grotesque and paradoxical?

Weiner (1992) uncovers and discusses this kind of paradox in the circulation of inalienable possessions. Miller (2001) suggests that inalienability itself can be paradoxical as consumer goods (perfectly alienable in a received classification of objects) can be inalienable, effectively and affectively serving the functions and purposes reserved for 'special possessions'. In our research, focusing on materiality, we considered a set of consumer goods, referred to as iconic or cult brands (e.g. Berdahl, 2001; Holt, 2004; Merkel, 2006). The account presented here offers an insight into how socio-material paradoxes, tensions and contradictions are indeed sustenance of these goods.

Created in Soviet times as tangible signs of prosperous equality for all, socialist branded goods became powerful, if mythical, indexes of social hierarchy. Destined to disappear amid the Soviet collapse, they emerged densely saturated with socio-cultural significance. In examining the socio-material dynamics of this emergence, we suggested that Soviet brands changed because they remained the same or at least materially main-

tained the appearance of sameness and stability. In doing so, they engendered a contradictory mix of continuation and disruption, persistence and distraction. They express socio-cultural relationships and are the very stuff of them even as the latter undergo qualitative change. They stand for the presence of GOSTs and are ghosts, of 'simpler and purer' Soviet living and an 'efficient and wholesome' Soviet economy, which in fact never existed. They facilitate remembering and forgetting as they oscillate between their material forms of a memory prop and a consumable product, provoking a commentary on present relationships, the economy and society from the perspective of an imaginary past. They are universal and common markers that convey particular realities and experiences of individuals and generational cohorts. They seem to live when torn apart in commercial wars, and they appear on the verge of extinction when codified into a special status for protection purposes. Elevated to a monumental standing of 'symbols of the Soviet epoch', Soviet brands are simultaneously a celebration and satire of the past. These humble, if historical, goods articulate tensions between form and substance, ideology and experiences, and they incite both patriotic sensibilities and sardonic banter.

All in all, in these multiple and contradictory becomings, the brands are material and immaterial at the same time (Miller, 2005). The salience of these seemingly antithetical conditions is shifting, depending on situational factors and experiential domains; in this way, brands display a certain elusiveness, oscillating and flowing between contradictory forms, ideas and emotions. An effect of this elusiveness is ambivalence – an ambivalence, it has been argued recently, that defines the historical context of post-socialist Russia, in which the authorities have abandoned the idea of the official state ideology and instead advance their dominance through a 'do-it-yourself ideology', encouraging public self-reliance in making sense of history and employing 'non-traditional' means to engage people in the current socio-political project of stitching together, repairing and modifying 'the idea of Russia' (Morozov, 2008). In this light, in the time and place of Russia, iconic Soviet brands are (im)material entities that stand for and animate this historical socio-cultural moment. As we have tried to show in this article, the inherent ambivalence and multifarious material realizations of iconic brands elicit people's responses and inferences as much as they mediate and enable power in multifarious and subtle ways. The overt focus on the multiply manifest materiality of iconic brands thus has potential for shedding light on the ideological effects that iconic brands generate, either directly or as instruments of the agency of others.

Notes

1. The coverage of the event was extensive with multiple reprints and reproductions across the media; for example, *Izvestia* (April 2004a, August 2004b); *Utro* (April 2004). For positive media stories on the *Druzhba* brand, see Karat (n.d.).
2. For example, one informant indicated that he would go to great lengths to search through labels to find a pack of *Belomorkanal* cigarettes, produced in a particular Leningrad factory. He was adamant that cigarettes from that factory were of markedly better quality than identical cigarettes produced elsewhere.
3. There is scarce information on how the former Soviet factories survived the 1990s (*Vlast'*, September 2001). However, interviews with 'crisis managers' shed some light on it (e.g. *Ogonek*, October 2001).
4. This material explanation also sheds light on why mostly consumables such as foodstuffs and tobacco survived the economic crises and achieved iconic status. While foodstuffs undoubtedly have a particular cultural significance in enacting forms of sociality (Caldwell, 2002; Sutton, 2001), it appears that the material continuity we observe here is a significant factor.
5. See Manning and Uplisashvili (2007) for a discussion of a similar phenomenon in the context of the Georgian beer market.
6. These perceptions of the 'naturalness' of Soviet foodstuffs appear to be common in the post-Soviet world. For example, Klumbyte (2007) reports similar sentiments about Soviet sausage in post-Soviet Lithuania.
7. The informant's comment echoes Dunn's (2008) fine description of the emergence and workings of the GOST system as a technological assemblage of multiple actors, ideas and practices in the Soviet canned food industry.
8. UKAS (the United Kingdom Accreditation Service) provides certification, testing, inspection and calibration services (see www.ukas.com). Russia's Federal Agency on Technical Regulating and Metrology carries out similar functions (see www.gost.ru).
9. In addition to Druzhba and Yantar brand stories (note 1), see e.g. *Itartass* (December 2006); Samokatov (2005); *Mayak* (April 2006); *Ogonek* (May 2004a, May 2004b, November 2004c); Zhirnov (2004).
10. It is noteworthy that such a conception of people's role in the creation of brands as icons differs from the way this role is envisioned in the context of Western brands. For Western brands, as several scholars have theorized (e.g. Arvidsson, 2005; Foster, 2008; Holt, 2004), people are said to participate in the production of brand value through their meaning-making practice in consumption. For Soviet brands, it appears, people's contribution is framed as arising from direct productive labour and entitlement to ownership under the socialist property regime.
11. On 'how the Soviet brands are [being] killed' and for the battles over brands, see e.g. *Vedomosti* (August 2000), *Kompania* (August 2000, February 2001) and Rosenberg (2000).
12. A complete record of the legal appeals (along with the supporting documents) pertaining to the exclusive rights to *Druzhba* and *Yantar* are available on *Rospatent* (www.flips.ru) and the Business Patent Bureau (www.business patent.ru), the legal representative of the contesting side.
13. While legal appeals lasted for years and the success of its vodka trademarks did not come easily to *Soyuzplodoimport*, it has since been involved in a number of large-scale redistributions in the relevant markets. In February 2007, it obtained rights to the *Druzhba* and *Yantar* trademarks (*Lenta.ru*, February 2007).

References

Aaker, David A. (1991) *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name*. London: Jossey Bass Wiley.

AiF (Argumenti i Facti) (2004) 'Simvoli Epoki SSSR Zakhvacheni za Groshi', 42(1251), 20 October. URL (consulted 7 May 2008): http://www.aif.ru/online/aif/1251/01_01

Alexander, Catherine (2004) 'Value, Relations, and Changing Bodies: Privatization and Property Rights in Kazakhstan', in K. Verdery and C. Humphrey (eds) *Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy*, pp. 251–73. Oxford: Berg.

Appadurai, Arjun (1986) 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in A. Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in a Cultural Perspective*, pp. 3–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arvidsson, Adam (2001) 'From Counter Culture to Consumer Culture: Vespa and the Italian Youth Market, 1958–78', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(1): 47–71.

Arvidsson, Adam (2005) 'Brands: A Critical Perspective', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(2): 235–58.

Arvidsson, Adam (2006) *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Baudrillard, Jean (1998) *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures*. London: Sage.

Berdahl, Daphne (2001) 'Go, Trabi, Go! Reflection on a Car and Its Symbolization over Time', *Anthropology and Humanism* 25(2): 131–41.

Betts, Paul (2000) 'The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture', *Journal of Modern History* 72, September: 731–65.

Blomley, Nicholas (1998) 'Landscapes of Property', *Law & Society Review* 32(3): 567–612.

Business Week (2004) 'Cult Brands: The Best Global Brands 2004 (Special Report)', 2 August: 2, 9–16.

Caldwell, Melissa (2002) 'The Taste of Nationalism: Food Politics in Postsocialist Moscow', *Ethnos* 67(3): 295–319.

Chernish, Mikhail (2000) 'Rossia Derzhit Marku', *So-Obshenie* 5. URL (consulted 4 Sept. 2008): www.soob.ru

Coombe, Rosemary (1998) *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

De Chernatony, Leslie and Riley, Francesca D. (1997) 'The Chasm between Managers and Consumers' Views of Brands: The Expert's Perspective', *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 5: 89–107.

Drescher, Thomas D. (1992) 'The Transformation and Evolution of Trademarks: From Signals to Symbols to Myths', *Trademark Reporter* 82: 301–40.

Dunn, Elizabeth Cullen (2008) 'Postsocialist Spores: Disease, Bodies, and the State in the Republic of Georgia', *American Ethnologists* 35(2): 243–58.

Eaton, Katherine (2004) *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Engelke, Matthew (2005) 'Sticky Subjects and Sticky Objects: The Substance of African Christian Healing', in D. Miller (ed.) *Materiality*, pp. 118–39. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Erofeev, Alexandr (1999) 'Ot Imeni k Brendam. Razvitie Torgovich Marok Prodovolstennikh Tovarov v Rossii', *Advertising Ideas/Yes!* 1. URL (consulted 7 May 2008): www.advi.ru

Fehérváry, Krisztina (2002) 'American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a "Normal" Life in Postsocialist Hungary', *Ethnos* 67(3): 369–400.

Fehérváry, Krisztina (2009) 'Goods and States: The Political Logic of State-Socialist Material Culture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51(2): 426–59.

Fitzpatrick, Sheila (1999) *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Forest, Benjamin and Johnson, Juliet (2002) 'Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92(3): 524–48.
Foster, Robert J. (2008) *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guinea*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Gronow, Jukka (2003) *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideas of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia*. Oxford: Berg.
Holt, Douglas (2004) *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
Holt, Douglas B. (2006) 'Jack Daniel's America: Iconic Brands as Ideological Parasites and Proselytizers', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(3): 355–77.
Humphrey, Catherine (1995) 'Creating a Culture of Disillusionment: Consumption in Moscow, a Chronicle of Changing Times', in D. Miller (ed.) *Worlds Apart*, pp. 43–68. London: Routledge.
Itartass (2006) 'Doktorskaya Kolbasa "Otmechaet" 70-letie', 12 December. URL (consulted 4 Sept. 2008): itartass.ur.ru
Izvestia (2004a) 'Sirok Druzba Uvekovechat v Bronze', 28 April.
Izvestia (2004b) 'Kamennii Sirok v Ogorodnom Proezde', 26 August.
Kapferer, Jean Noel (1992) *Strategic Brand Management*. New York: The Free Press.
Karat (n.d.) Official website for Karat Company Moscow. URL (consulted 11 Oct. 2008): www.karatsc.ru
Keane, Webb (2003) 'Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things', *Language & Communication* 23: 409–25.
Klein, Naomi (2000) *No Logo*. London: Flamingo.
Klumbyte, Neringa (2007) 'The Geopolitics of Provincialism and the Political Economy of the Orient in the Post-EU Lithuania', paper presented at the Annual SOYUZ Symposium, Princeton University, NJ, April 27 to 29.
Kommersant (2004) 'Sovetskoe Shampanskoe Budut Lit' Eshe Desyat' Let', no. 159, 30 August. URL (consulted 6 Sept. 2008): www.kommersant.ru
Kommersant (2008) 'Soyuzplodoimport to Get out of the Bottle', no. 132, 30 July. URL (consulted 6 Sept. 2008): www.kommersant.ru
Kompania (2000) 'Brendi, Kotorie Mi Teryaem', no. 127, 21 August. URL (consulted 12 May 2008): www.ko.ru
Ledeneva, Alena C. (1998) *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lenta.ru (2007) 'Siri Yantar i Druzhba Prinadlezhat Gosudarstvu', 6 February. URL (consulted 16 Feb. 2010): www.lenta.ru
Levy, Sidney (1959) 'Symbols for Sale', *Harvard Business Review* 37(4): 117–24.
Lury, Celia (2004) *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*. New York: Routledge.
Manning, Paul (2009) 'The Epoch of Magna: Capitalist Brands and Postsocialist Revolutions in Georgia', *Slavic Review* 68(4): forthcoming.
Manning, Paul and Uplisashvili, Ann (2007) '"Our Beer": Ethnographic Brands in Postsocialist Georgia', *American Anthropologist* 109(4): 626–41.
Marjin, Alexander (2002) 'In Russland tobt der Streit um Wodka-Marken', *Berliner Zeitung*, 4 January. URL (consulted 11 Oct. 2008): www.berlinonline.de/berliner-zeitung/
Mayak (2006) 'Doktorskoy Kolbase Ispolnyatsya 70 let', 29 April. URL (consulted 12 May 2008): mayak.rfn.ru
Merkel, Ina (2006) 'From Stigma to Cult: Changing Meanings in East German Consumer Culture', in F. Trentmann (ed.) *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, pp. 249–70. Oxford: Berg.

Miller, Daniel (1998a) 'Coca-Cola: A Black Sweet Drink from Trinidad', in D. Miller (ed.) *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, pp. 169–87. London: University College London Press.
Miller, Daniel (1998b) *Theory of Shopping*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Miller, Daniel (2001) 'Alienable Gifts and Inalienable Commodities', in F. Myers (ed.) *Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, pp. 91–115. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
Miller, Daniel (2005) *Materiality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Miller, Daniel (2008) 'Commentary', in D. Wengrow 'Prehistories of Commodity Branding', *Current Anthropology* 49, February: 7–34.
Moor, Liz (2007) *The Rise of Brands*. Oxford: Berg.
Moore, Robert E. (2003) 'From Genericide to Viral Marketing: On "Brand"', *Language and Communication* 23: 331–57.
Morozov, Evgeny (2008) 'Russia: Ideology Becomes a Mash-Up', Opendemocracy.net, 5 August.
Ogonek (2001) 'Strana Pobedivshego Shokolada', no. 44, 29 October: 34–7.
Ogonek (2004a) 'Den' Sirka', no. 18, 3 May: 36–7.
Ogonek (2004b) 'U Istokov Pivnoi Reki', no. 20, 17 May: 36.
Ogonek (2004c) 'Vodka 'Stolichnaya', no. 48, 29 November: 66.
Ogonek (2005) 'Izmenis' ili Umri', no. 5, 31 January: 16–9.
Osokina, Elena (2001) *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927–1941*. London: Sharpe.
Preda, Alex (1999) 'The Turn to Things: Arguments for a Sociological Theory of Things', *Sociological Quarterly* 40(2): 347–66.
Prime-Tass (2006) 'Sovetskoe Znachit Otlichnoe', 14 June. URL (consulted 11 Oct. 2008): www.prime-tass.ru
Propp, Vladimir (1968[1928]) *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. L. Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Rappaport, Erika (2006) 'Packaging China: Foreign Articles and Dangerous Tastes in the mid-Victorian Tea Party', in F. Trentmann (ed.) *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power, and Identity in the Modern World*, pp. 125–46. Oxford: Berg.
RBCDaily (2004) 'Rosspirtprom Nachal Bankrotit' Vodochnie Zavodi', 6 August. URL (consulted 6 Sept. 2008): www.rbcdaily.ru
ROMIR (n.d.) website for ROMIR, a Russian Market Research Company. URL (consulted 17 Sept. 2008): www.romir.ru
Rosenberg, Irina (2000) 'Marki – Shou: V Glavnoi Roli – Gosudarstvo', *Itogi* 34, 17 August: 19.
Rospatent (n.d.) Official website. URL (consulted 6 Sept. 2008): http://www.fips.ru/rospatent/index.htm
Rossiiskaya Gazeta (2004) 'V Kamne i V Brinze', 13 May.
Rowlands, Michael and Tilley, Christopher (2006) 'Monuments and Memorials', in C. Tilley et al. (eds) *Handbook of Material Culture*, pp. 500–15. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Russki Fokus (2001) 'Kollectivnaya Marka', 17 September.
Samokatov, V. (2005) 'V Batone "Doktorskoy" Dolgo Iskali Myaso', *Utro.ru*, 21 March.
Sukhova, Svetlana (2006) 'GOSTom Budete', *Itogi* 14, 4 February: 27.
Sutton, David (2001) *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. Oxford: Berg.
Taratuta, Yulia (2004) 'Triumfalnie Marki', *Kommersant Dengi* 46, 22 November: 501.
Utro (2004) 'Znamenitii Plavlenii Sirok Resheno Uvekovechit', 29 April. URL (consulted 12 May 2008): www.utro.ru/articles/2004/04/29/303118.shtml

Van der Hoorn, Mélanie (2003) 'Exorcizing Remains: Architectural Fragments as Intermediaries between History and Individual Experience', *Journal of Material Culture* 8(2): 189–213.
Vedomosti (2000) 'Ne Soglasni? Obrashaites' v Sud', no. 137, 1 August. URL (consulted 17 Sept. 2008): www.vedomosti.ru
Veenis, Milena (1999) 'Consumption in East Germany: The Seduction and Betrayal of Things', *Journal of Material Culture* 4(1): 79–112.
Verdery, Katherine (2003) *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Vlast' (2001) 'Dobrov: "Komu Prinadlezhit Rossia: Pishevaya Promishlennost"', no. 38, 25 September.
Weiner, Annette (1992) *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*. Berkley: University of California Press..
Weiner, Annette (1994) 'Cultural Differences and the Density of Objects', *American Ethnologist* 21: 391–403.
Wengrow, David (2008) 'Prehistories of Commodity Branding', *Current Anthropology* 49(1): 7–34.
Wilk, Richard (2006) *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists*. Oxford: Berg.
Yurchak, Alexei (2006) *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Zhirnov, E. (2004) 'Shipuchaya Deyatel'nost'', *Dengi* 50, 20 December: 17.

◆ **OLGA KRAVETS** is Assistant Professor of Marketing at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. She holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Sydney, Australia. Her research interests centre on the anthropology of brands and branding, with a focus on practices of consumer activism and brand ownership. She has recently published on consumer vigilantism (in Fitzsimons and Morwitz, eds, *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 34, Association for Consumer Research, 2007) and temporalities of commodities (Guliz and Kravets in Shove et al., eds, *Time, Consumption & Everyday Life*, 2009). She is also interested in the ways in which ideologies materialize in and through commercial artifacts. Her current research examines the ideological variation and change in vodka branding and the related issues of governance through marketing. *Address*: Faculty of Business Administration MA329, Bilkent University, Ankara 06800, Turkey. [email: olga@bilkent.edu.tr]

◆ **ÖRSAN ÖRGE** is Assistant Professor of Management and Organization Studies at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. He holds a PhD in Business from the University of Kansas, USA. His research interests revolve around entrepreneurship and organizational becoming. Based on anthropological fieldwork in entrepreneurial settings, he writes on micro-level practices that underlie entrepreneurship as a creative process. He is also interested in the material aspects of organizing and explores how materiality plays into processes of organizational emergence and ordering. *Address*: Faculty of Business Administration MA308, Bilkent University, Ankara 06800, Turkey. [email: orsan@bilkent.edu.tr]